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AUTHOR Bigler, Rebecca S.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a theory of the formation of social stereotyping and prejudice in children. This intergroup-developmental theory of prejudice has three primary goals: to account for the development of stereotyping and prejudice across multiple domains; to provide a developmental account of social stereotyping, outlining how developmental constraints on children's cognitive skills affect their construction of social categories and their meaning; and to describe the possible interaction of organismic and environmental factors in explaining the origins and developmental path of social stereotyping. The paper describes the methodological paradigm for experimental testing of this theory, as well as relevant observations within this paradigm conducted with children ages 6 to 11 years from a summer school program. The paper also discusses four environmental and group characteristics that have been shown experimentally to be relevant to racial stereotyping: functional use, perceptual salience, minority status, and the presence of group-to-attribute links. The interaction of these factors is also considered. Contains 14 references. (JPB)

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The Development of Social Stereotyping in Children

Rebecca S. Bigler

University of Texas at Austin

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The Development of Social Stereotyping in Children

Abstract

Within social psychology, intergroup theories and research paradigms have been useful for understanding the formation of intergroup attitudes. In my own work, I have applied an intergroup-developmental perspective, and intergroup methodologies involving the experimental manipulation of novel social groups, to test the causal role of environmental and group factors in the development of stereotyping and prejudice. I argue that intergroup research with "minimal," novel groups can inform our understanding of the mechanisms involved in racial stereotyping among children.

The Development of Social Stereotyping in Children

During the last few years, I have been developing a broad theory of the formation of social stereotyping and prejudice in children. This theory-- an intergroup-developmental theory of prejudice--has three primary goals. They are to: (1) account for the development of stereotyping and prejudice across multiple domains (including race, age, gender, etc.), (2) provide a truly developmental account of social stereotyping, outlining how developmental constraints on children's cognitive skills affect their construction of social categories and their meaning, and (3) describe the possible interaction of organismic and environmental factors in explaining the origins and developmental path of social stereotyping.

In working on this intergroup theory, I have approached the topic of racial stereotyping from a somewhat unique perspective. Specifically, I have examined race as one person characteristic of many potential characteristics that could be used to categorize individuals. The critical questions for my research are: Why does race become the basis of social categorization and stereotyping among children? What are the exact environmental conditions necessary for racial stereotyping to arise? Which biological correlates of race (e.g., skin color) are important to racial attitude formation? What factors account for individual difference among children in their tendency to use race as a social category? Do the environmental and biological factors that contribute to racial bias vary across age, and if so, how and why?

Intergroup Theory

The major theoretical foundation for my account of stereotyping is intergroup theory and I believe that intergroup theory is very valuable (both conceptually and methodologically) for examining racial stereotyping. In 1971, Henri Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971) proposed that the mere act of categorizing individuals into social groups was sufficient to produce intergroup prejudice

and discrimination. Several consequences of social categorization under "minimal" group condition (i.e., when social categories were uninformative, irrelevant, or completely unfounded) have been well documented within the social psychological literature (see Brewer, 1979; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986; Messick & Mackie, 1989). Social categorization has been shown to produce (1) increased perception of between-group differences and within-group similarity (e.g., Doise, Deschamps, & Meyer, 1978), (2) increased perception of out-group homogeneity (e.g., Park & Rothbart, 1982; Quattrone & Jones, 1980), and (3) increased intergroup bias, including both in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (e.g., Allen & Wilder, 1975; Brewer & Silver, 1978). To date, relatively little developmental work had examined intergroup attitudes in children, and thus little is known about whether intergroup processes are implicated in racial stereotyping.

A few years ago, I began a program of intergroup research aimed at systematically examining the effects of environmental and organismic variables on the formation of intergroup attitudes. Intergroup research paradigms are particularly useful for examining attitude formation because such paradigms typically involve the experimental manipulation of social groups, and thus allow for a test of the causal role of various group characteristics and environmental factors in the development of stereotyping and prejudice. But how might intergroup research with "minimal" groups inform our understanding of racial stereotyping? Today, I will briefly describe the methodological paradigm for my intergroup work and how it might lead to insight about the causes of racial stereotyping.

In my experimental work, participants are children between the ages of six and eleven who are attending a six-week summer school program. They are unfamiliar with each other at the start of the summer session and attend school five days a week from 8:00 am until noon. During the first days of school, children are given organismic (or individual difference measures) of those variables hypothesized to effect intergroup

attitudes. For example, . . have assessed self-esteem, verbal intelligence, and cognitive skills such as multiple classification skill.

Classrooms are matched for overall age level and assigned to various experimental conditions. Two classrooms of 11 to 13 children participated in each experimental condition. For example, one recent study was designed to examine the effect of the presence of perceptually salient groups (such as racial groups) on children intergroup attitudes-- both when these groups were labeled and used by teachers (though in a neutral manner) and when they were ignored by authority figures. In each classroom, children were given a tee-shirt (called a "work shirt") to wear during the school day. Half of the children in each room were given yellow shirts and half were given blue shirts. In some of the classrooms, teachers made functional use of "blue" and "yellow" groups. That is, they organized classroom desks, bulletin boards, activities , etc., by color groups. In the control condition, children wore yellow or blue shirts, but teachers did not make functional use of the color groups. After four weeks, children were given posttest measures of intergroup attitudes. These posttest measures typically include children's perceptions of trait variability within and between groups, evaluation of group competence and performance, helping behavior, and peer ratings. In other work, we have used this paradigm to study the effect of functionally using <u>non-perceptually salient</u> groups (red and green groups without tee-shirts) on children's social stereotyping and prejudice (see Bigler, 1995).

<u>Four Principles of the Formation and Maintenance of Social Stereotyping and Prejudice</u>

On the basis of studies such as these, as well as the work of a great number of other researchers, I have begun to outline what I believe are the major factors influencing the formation of social stereotyping and prejudice children. Today, I will focus on four environmental and group characteristics that are highly relevant to racial stereotyping.

<u>Functional Use</u>

Social groups that are used in a functional manner in the environment become the target of intergroup bias much more readily than social groups that are not used in a functional manner in the environment. That is, social groups that are used by authority figures to organize the social environment (e.g., by assigning desks or bulletin boards) and to distinguish among individuals (e.g., by lining them up separately) are likely to become the subject of intergroup bias among children. It should be noted that this is true even when these categories are used in a completely neutral manner (i.e., social groups are not explicitly linked to any particular roles or traits and are not differentially valued in the environment by authority figures).

In our culture, the practice of using race in a functional manner has largely been abandon. While teachers can organize their classrooms by gender (saying, for example, "Good Morning, boys and girls"), they cannot organize their classrooms by race (saying"Good Morning, Black and White children"). It is important to note, however, that the functional use of race has characterized most of American history. My research suggests that discouraging the functional use of race is good social policy in that it is likely to inhibit the development of racial stereotyping among children.

Perceptual Salience

Social groups that are marked by perceptually salient attributes become the target of intergroup bias among children much more readily than social groups that are not marked by perceptually salient attributes. This is consistent with Piaget's (1970) suggestion that young children's thinking is tied to perceptually salient dimensions of objects and people. In our experimental work, those groups that are not marked by perceptually salient features do not become the basis of stereotyping--even when the environment places a great deal of emphasis on these groups (e.g., Bigler, 1995).

The perceptual salience of race is likely to predispose children to attend to it. We know little, however, about the exact features associated with race that are salient to children. Further, research using this paradigm suggests that even perceptually salient

groups do not become the basis for stereotyping when they are ignored by authority figures in the environment.

Minority Status. Several theorists have suggested that social groups that have minority status are likely to become the subject of negative intergroup attitudes via several unique mechanisms, such as distinctiveness-based illusory correlations. In our experimental work, in which children were made members of minority status color (e.g., blue vs. yellow) groups, children did not develop negative intergroup attitudes. (It should be noted, however, that these groups were not used in a functional manner by teachers.) Minority status alone did, however, affect children's peer preferences (minority children preferred other minority group members as playmates) and their group evaluations (minority children wanted to change color groups and rated both their own group and the majority group less favorably than the majority group). Finally, all children remembered a negative behavior performed by a minority group member better than a negative behavior performed by a majority group member, suggesting that minority groups might become associated with more negative attributes than majority groups across time.

Again, these findings have implications for understanding the development of racial bias. African American children, as well as children from other racial and ethnic group, are often in the position of being in the numeric minority in social and educational groups. It seems desirable to have a better understanding of the consequences of minority status for racial attitude formation and change.

The Presence of Group-to-Attribute Links. The presence of an extensive pattern of linkages between social groups and various traits/roles is likely to promote social stereotype formation and prejudice. It is important to note that such links may be explicit or implicit. So, for example, a child might be told "African Americans are good at basketball" (an explicit link), or might simply observe that three out of every four individuals in the NBA are African American (an implicit link). Again, Bem (1983), as well as other theorists, have argued that these linkages affect children's social

stereotyping. Empirical work has largely supported the claim that children attend to such links and these traits/roles influence children's intergroup attitudes (see Fishbein, 1996).

In nearly all cultures, race is explicitly and implicitly linked to a very wide variety of traits and roles. While we know that the presence of group-to-attribute links is important, we know almost nothing about the parameters within which these links work to affect stereotyping. We do not know, for example, what percentage of those performing a given role must be African American (or white) in order for children to form a link between that role and a particular race, or whether this percentage varies as a function of children's age. An additional interesting question is what children do when explicit and implicit messages are contradictory (e.g., when children are explicitly told that African Americans and whites can do the same jobs, and at the same time, are exposed to African Americans and whites performing different jobs within society).

The Interaction of These Factors.

These four factors are important in the process of developing intergroup attitudes but it is crucial to note that when any one of these conditions is present alone--social stereotypes and prejudice are highly unlikely to development. Thus, a perceptually salient group that is not pointed out by the environment, and is not linked to a network of attributes, is highly unlikely to become the basis of intergroup bias. Additionally, a social group that is used in a functional manner, but is not perceptually salient and is not linked to a network of attributes, is also highly unlikely to become the basis for intergroup bias.

Combinations of any two (or more) of the factors does, however, produce intergroup stereotyping and prejudice. Thus, when a perceptually-salient group is also used in a functional manner by the environment, children will associate negative traits and roles with the out-group and positive traits and roles with the in-group even in the complete absence of actual category-attribute links. In other words, stereotypes are not always based on a "kernel of truth."

Finally, it is important to note that a host of other factors that influence intergroup processes among children, including power and prestige, and dichotomous versus continuous groups. I have examined the effects of some of these factors in my research; other factors are scheduled for future work. It is my hope that the systematic manipulation of these factors is likely to improve our understanding of why race becomes the basis for stereotyping among children, how race stereotyping differs from other forms of intergroup prejudice, and how race stereotyping might be reduced via psychological intervention and societal change.

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